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## ABSTRACT

This paper shows how the Sullivan House Alternative High School, Chicago, Illinois, incorporated the philosophy of John Dewey into the schools curriculum, discipline, and the relationship between teachers, first as a small school with much freedom, and later as a more structured high school. Dewey, in *The School and Society*, identified four natural instincts of children that schools should see as resources and around which they should develop their programs. Janice Greer, in founding the Sullivan House school, used these instincts and six tenets derived from Dewey's writings to organize the schools as a small learning community. The first tenet is to help students see themselves as valued members of a community. Next is offering teachers adequate time to feel and show concern for their students. The third and fourth are to engage students in working out real problems that will develop the habits of mind necessary for real learning and constructive work. The fifth is to have an emphasis on creative activity, and the final tenet is to encourage adults and students to interact with much informal conversation and class discussion. These tenets were made integral to the formation of the Sullivan House alternative school. (SLD)

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## *Application of John Dewey's Ideas to an Inner City Alternative High School*

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John Dewey wrote in *The School and Society*, which was first published in 1900 during the time he was director of his famous Laboratory School at the University of Chicago, that children have natural instincts which schools should look at as resources and develop their programs around. These instincts he placed in four groups. They are the social instinct of conversation and communication. The constructive impulse for making things and shaping materials. The third instinct of investigation grows out of the first two impulses as children "like to do things and watch to see what will happen" (1915, p. 43) Finally there is the expressive impulse to tell and represent through art. Here I show how Janice Greer developed a school program around these instincts.

In my paper I gave a brief history of how Janice Greer began what was known as a free school in the early 1970s and gradually expanded her program into a child welfare agency which operates the Sullivan House Alternative High School. As I first thought of writing this paper after reading Laurel N. Tanner's *Dewey's Laboratory School: Lessons for Today* published in 1997 I used the 6 principles she believed Dewey used to organize his lab school towards the development of "growth of character" (1997, p.35). Today I will list these six tenets. Then I will go back to develop each through quotes from Dewey's writing in *The School and Society* and *Experience and Education*. I will discuss how the Sullivan House Alternative High School develops our curriculum, discipline, and school climate around these principles.

These six tenets are based on organizing the school as a small learning community. The first is to help students see themselves as valued members of the community. Next is offering teachers adequate time to feel and show concern for their students. The third and fourth are to engage students in working out real problems which will develop the habits of mind necessary for real learning and constructive work. The fifth is to have an emphasis on creative activity. The final tenet is to encourage adults and students to interact with much informal conversation and class discussion.

Starting with the first tenet Laurel Tanner wrote, "the school was organized as an informal community in which each child felt that she had a share and her own work to do (1997, p. 35)" as "miniature communities offer opportunities for each student to feel, in Dewey's words that they are actors, not just onlookers in the saga of human development" (p. 34). To quote Dewey again, he saw "Basing education upon personal experience may mean more multiplied and more intimate contacts between the mature and the immature" (Dewey, 1938, p. 21).

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Sullivan House Alternative High School currently works with the young people who have a history of family problems and personal failure in schools. Many of these students have been raised in foster homes or by a succession of family relatives; others come from families with substance abuse problems, severe illness, or other problems which caused much dysfunction. Most of these students are lacking in social and emotional skills; they need to learn good work habits and develop an understanding of responsibility, and a belief of their own future. To assist students in reaching these skills, they are involved in much of the work of the school. Sullivan House students make breakfast and lunch, participate in the work of the school office and the on-site day care center, and serve as school custodians. Students begin as apprentices but often are given major responsibilities to handle independently. Through this type of activity they work closely with adults and see them fulfill their responsibilities in a dependable and polite manner.

Through assisting adults in their work and through the field trips they take around Chicago, students see different types of employment. This is followed up by having teachers address work-related issues in their classes such as explaining how the material and skills they are learning are used on various jobs. The school's curricular theme is organized around concern for students' futures.

"Second, the spirit of the school was one in which teachers were there to help if a child had a problem, and so they modeled concern of one person for another" (Tanner, 1997, p. 35). Because of their students' difficulties, Sullivan House keeps classes at eight to twelve students per teacher. Teachers are expected to be active in the classroom, drawing out slow learners and shy students, offering enrichment to bright students, maintaining a comfortable and safe atmosphere, leading discussions, helping each student with the assignment to ensure mastery of the material, and correcting mistakes as they go along. Sullivan House teachers go out of their way to help students feel comfortable so they will succeed and learn. Teachers socialize and eat lunch with the students. Teachers have assisted students in raising money for Prom, lent them Prom clothes, and have taken students to medical appointments, shopping malls, and cultural events. They mentor students and see themselves as part of the students' extended families. Sullivan House staff take very seriously Dewey's statement "what the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy" (1915, p.7).

It is also important that Sullivan House teachers are well educated themselves on the subjects they are teaching and are willing to model good scholarship. This allows the teachers to build into their lessons material that will interest the individuals in each class and to follow tangents students bring up. It is the teacher's business, Dewey wrote, "to be on the alert to see what attitudes and habitual tendencies are being created. In this direction he must . . . be able to judge what attitudes are actually conducive to continued growth and what are detrimental. He must, in addition, have that sympathetic understanding of individuals as individuals which gives him an idea of what is actually going on in the minds of those who are learning" (1938, p 39).

"Third, emphasis was placed on how to work out problems" (Tanner, 1997, p. 35). This takes place daily at Sullivan House, in the school internships, through the types of assignments in classes, in how interpersonal problems are solved, and through many other opportunities offered to students. Sullivan House's efforts to involve students in many aspects of the school's functioning, emphasizes "the importance of the participation of the learner in the formation of the purposes which direct his activities in the learning process" (Dewey, 1938, p. 67).

"Fourth, the school sought to develop the kind of habits that lead children to act in certain ways. . . . Practice in working out problems, accepting responsibility, meeting new situations, cooperating with others, and engaging in real and practical work" (Tanner, 1997, p.36). Teachers improvise and create curriculum material that is relevant to the students' lives, to career planning, and to functional living skills. Topics are related to the students so they understand where they are in the world geographically and historically and offer an emphasis on their culture. Sullivan House teachers give many hands-on projects which incorporate the different learning styles. Assignments include the making of art, graphic, and computer displays, time lines, scrapbooks, photo journals, school newspapers, dramatic presentations, and debates. Teachers continually take students on field trips to augment their studies. Because of their small classes, teachers serve as facilitators who engage the students in exploration and inquiry-based learning. Projects allow the student to gain "habits of industry, order, and regard for the rights and ideas of others, and the fundamental habit of subordinating his activities to the general interest" (Dewey, 1915, p. 35) of the group.

Even small differences between Sullivan House classes and those of traditional schools encouraged major changes in their students' behavior and attitudes. Dewey complained that school furniture and space are designed only for "for listening" (Dewey, 1915, p. 31). Instead of small desks set in rows in this alternative high school students sit around a large table which allowed for the face-to-face interaction needed for lively class discussions. These room arrangements also allowed students to spread out when they were involved in creative projects. Field trips often involved walking to a business, institution, or resource person in the local community. Dewey thought teachers "should know how to utilize the surroundings, physical and social, that exist so as to extract from them all that they have to contribute to building up experiences that are worth while. . . . the teacher should become intimately acquainted with the conditions of the local community, physical, historical, economic, occupational, etc. in order to utilize them as educational resources" (1938, p. 40).

"Fifth, there was an emphasis on creative activity" (Tanner, 1997, p. 35). In *The School and Society*, Dewey wrote "students would stay in school longer if we had activities to make and to do" (1915, p. 28). We found this so true as we are able to retrieve many students who had dropped out of regular schools. They find Sullivan House's use of art and discussion in classes, art and wood shop classes, and the internship opportunities able to better meet their needs and learning styles.

Sullivan House staff follow Dewey's ideas on discipline. There are always have a number of new students whose reading and math skills are so low they will not even participate in remedial classes. First they need to feel a valued part of the school. To achieve this Sullivan House staff build on Dewey's understanding of the psychology of occupations.

"The fundamental point in the psychology of an occupation is that it maintains a balance between the intellectual and the practical phases of experience. As an occupation it is active or motor; it finds expression through the physical organs--the eyes, hands, etc. But it also involves continual observation of materials, and continual planning and reflection, in order that the practical or executive side may be successfully carried on. . . . This enables us to interpret the stress laid (a) upon personal experimenting, planning, and reinventing in connection with the [textile] work, and (b) its parallelism with lines of historical development" (1915, p.133-134).

At Sullivan House the food service program, art, and wood shop classes meet Dewey's criteria of occupations as discouraged students find satisfaction in making lunch, art and wood objects. They develop experience, attitudes, and habits which will carry over to their academic learning when they are ready. They do not have to act out to avoid academic work. The Art and Food Service teachers help their students set goals for themselves and evaluate their attainment; teach them to problem solve, plan, implement, and finish their projects; instruct them in the use and care of their tools; and instill in students the need to clean-up and put away tools and materials. As students work on their projects, they begin to cooperate with others and to communicate. As Dewey wrote, when "a group of children are actively engaged in the preparation of food, the psychological difference, the change from more or less passive and inert reciprocity and restraint to one of buoyant outgoing energy, is so obvious as fairly to strike one in the face" (Dewey, 1915, p. 15). Life skills, their futures, and history repeatedly come up in their daily discussions. The students find they need to understand fractions in order to measure their ingredients, calculate costs of different menus, improve their reading to better understand the sanitation manual. They learn why one needs to follow directions and gradually they accept limits imposed by the oven temperature and the clock, and eventually, limits suggested by teachers.

Students' writings are compiled and become a class magazine or a school newspaper. Involving the students in discussions and using writing to communicate with other people means that teachers do not have to spend time on drill because the student "who has a variety of materials and facts wants to talk about them, and his language becomes more refined and full, because it is controlled and informed by realities" (Dewey, 1915, p. 56).

"Finally, in Dewey's miniature community adults and children really talked with one another. The point is crucial for today's schools because it has become increasingly clear that mechanical instruction--even by humans--does not feed the human spirit. The result may be that children also lack humanity" (Tanner, 1997, p. 35). Sullivan House students and adults do a lot of talking and laughing. They talk about movies and t.v. shows, about the difficulties students experience, and grapple with the hard issues concerning their community. The teachers and counselors make an effort to learn students' interests and skills and to help guide them towards a career they will enjoy. These adults share their own expectations and plans so students learn about the lives grown-ups lead. Graduates keep in touch with their favorite teachers. Often teachers felt being role models and mentors was even more important than the teaching of academic skills.

In conclusion, I want to reiterate that to best meet students' educational needs, schools should address and meet the four natural impulses Dewey discussed (1915) and the six ways Tanner found that Dewey's school "sought growth of character" (Tanner, 1997, p. 35). This paper showed how Sullivan House incorporated the philosophy of John Dewey into the school's curriculum, discipline, and the relationship between teachers and students, first as a small school with much freedom and later as a more structured high school. Indeed it is imperative to actually practice Dewey's principles, not just to read and study his ideas.

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